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Teaching writing through teacher-student writing conferences*

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Abstract

Teacher-Student Writing Conferences are "private conversations between teacher and student about the student's writing or writing processes" (Sperling, 1991, p. 132). Murray (1985) called these conversations "professional discussion between writers" on students' writings (p. 140). This literature review paper investigates the related studies about a) the effects of writing conferences on student's writing achievement, learning, independence and authority; b) effective and ineffective writing conferences; c) interaction during writing conferences; and d) effects of writing conferences on students' self-efficacy. Based on reviewed studies' findings, recommendations and suggestions while conducting teacher-student writing conferences will be provided.

Keywords: Teaching writing, writing conferences, teacher education.

1. Introduction

This article consists of two main parts. To begin, the first part of the article defines teacher-student writing conferences. The second part of it examines related research in four major categories; effects of writing conferences on student's writing achievement, learning, independence and authority; effective and ineffective writing conferences; interaction during writing conferences; and effects of writing conferences on students' self-efficacy.

2. Definitions of Conferences

Teacher-student writing conferences are individual, one-on-one teacher-student conversations about the students' writing or writing process. "As students write, teachers often hold short, informal conferences to talk with them about their writing or to help them solve a problem related to their writing" (Tompkins, 1990, p. 370).

For several decades, writing conferences were investigated under different names reflecting their multiple functions including: assisted performance (Vygotsky, 1978); response sessions (Hansen, 1987); face-to-face interaction (Reigstad & McAndrew, 1984); one-to-one teaching (Calkins, 1986); one-to-one interaction (North, 1995; Sperling, 1991); interactive dialogues (Wong, Butler, Ficzere, and Kuperis,1997); and meaningful contact (Lerner, 2005).

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3. Related Research on Writing Conferences

In this part, the related research on writing conferences in four major categories is presented. These four categories are; research on effects of writing conferences on student's writing achievement, learning, independence and authority; research on effective and ineffective writing conferences; research on interaction during writing conferences; and research on effects of writing conferences on students' self-efficacy.

3.1 The effects of writing conferences on student's writing achievement, learning, independence and authority

Several studies purport that writing conferences make students better writers and improve their habits and attitudes toward learning and revision skills (Bell, 2002; Eickholdt, 2004; Koshik, 2002), independence, and authority. It has been argued that writing conferences increase students' higher-order and critical thinking skills as well as their learning by providing a social environment for the expert to help the novice become an independent writer (Flynn & King, 1993). In addition, writing conferences increase students' learning; students learn more in conferences than they learn by traditional methods and this happens in at least three ways: 1) conferencing allows students to observe a real listener, who is asking questions and reflecting on writers' texts; they imitate this inquiry strategy when they compose (Mabrito, 2006); 2) it enables hands on activity in which students' own texts are in hand, and 3) it provides an informal and friendly atmosphere. Writing conferences purportedly contribute to student confidence (Harris, 1995a; Martinez, 2001); independence (Calkins, 1985; Harris, 1995a; Martinez, 2001; McIver & Wolf, 1999; Murray, 1979); and empowerment (Young & Miller, 2004). A number of qualitative studies conclude that conferences help students to interact with their own texts (McIver & Wolf, 1999) and experience the feeling of authority and ownership (Martinez, 2001; Steward, 1991).

3.1.1. Effective and ineffective writing conferences

Effective writing conferences include predictable and focused discussion between teacher and students that allow students to generate their own ideas and solutions for their writing problems. During the conferences teachers and students exchange their roles back and forth and they both have equal chances to talk, to ask questions, describe, clarify and summarize (Anderson, 2000; Calkins, 1986; Lain, 2007). Finally, while conferencing with students, teachers keep in mind that humour is effective and even necessary while criticizing students' work (Graves, 1983). The related literature showed that students learned more in conferences where: attention was, first, on content of the text (Kaufman, 1998); students were invited to do self-evaluation and conferences were built on students' responses (Walker & Elias, 1987); teachers were friendly and approachable, acted as student-oriented nurturers, listened patiently, and focused on ideas, students initiated the conference and shared the control of conference conversations, and there was humour (Kaufman, 1998). On the other hand, students did not do well in conferences where teachers: confused quality with quantity and focused too much on mechanics and grammatical concerns (Oliver, 2001; Oye, 1993; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989); took control and kept the power (Di Pardo, 1992; Fletcher, 1993; Walker & Elias, 1987); pointed out and solved all the problems (Oye, 1993; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989); weren't patient enough (Johnson, 1993); asked unrelated or too many questions (Di Pardo, 1992; Fletcher, 1993; Johnson, 1993); had low expectations and produced correction-oriented conferences (Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989; Wilson-Powers (1999); and did not understand students' purposes or provided complicated suggestions (Nickel, 2001).

3.1.1.1. Interaction during writing conferences

The main topics that gained attention by the researchers were a) differences in terms of the comments provided by a teacher and students; b) variety of teacher's interaction with weak or strong students; c) authoritarian roles and dominance of teachers; d) negative interaction between the conference partners; e) effects of students' expertise on

conference talk; f) participants' roles in conferences; g) discourse markers have been used; h) non-verbal communication and body language; and i) amount and content of talk.

According to studies on writing conferences, teachers and students might have different focuses and concerns in terms of providing comments and asking questions (Gere & Stevens, 1985). Since students see the functions of conferences differently, conferences served diverse purposes among the students (Sperling, 1991). Overall, being knowledgeable about their own topics allowed students to have two-way conversations during conferences (Wong, 1998). Students reflected that they learned more in writing conferences than through written responses, or classroom discussions (Heyden, 1996). During conferences teachers could give individual help to each child while also proving specific feedback.

The teachers did most of the talking and they had the authority during conferences (Keebler, 1995; Martinez, 2001; Newkirk, 1989; Sperling, 1990; Thonus, 2002). The most common roles of teachers were being managers and editors and the least common roles were listener and collaborator (Bell, 2002). Teachers' use of unspoken agenda, interruptions, known-answer questions and lectures made students passive while presence of authentic questions, paraphrasing, uptakes, and supportive fillers made students active during conferences (Barker, 2003).

Additionally, teachers interacted differently with less proficient and proficient students. For instance, a) teachers mainly focused on the rules of writing while conferring with less proficient students (Mitchell, 1990); b) the length of writing conferences were longer with proficient students (Mitchell, 1990; Pathey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997); c) these students received more feedback from the teacher (Martinez, 2001; Mitchell, 1990); and d) the teachers acted like a facilitator with proficient students and they were more authoritative with less proficient students (Martinez, 2001).

Gender of the instructors and the status relationships between the instructors and students effected frequency and functions of discourse markers that have been used (Chiu, 2002). And finally, non-verbal behaviours and body language reflected the functions and types of conferences while also mirrored the displayed roles of the participants in writing conferences (Boudreaux, 1998; Jacob, 1982).

3.1.1.1.1. Effects of writing conferences on students' self-efficacy

According to social cognitive theory, "both environmental conditions (e.g., the consequences of behaviour and the presence of a role model) and personal variables (e.g., goals, expectations, and self-efficacy) influence learning and behaviour" (Ormrod, 2003, p. 148). Existence of a self-efficacy belief is very important because as Bandura (1993) said, "children with the same level of cognitive skill development differ in their intellectual performance depending on the strength of their perceived self-efficacy" (p. 136).

The few studies that do relate writing conferences to self-efficacy tend to mention it as desire to write more and share their writing proudly (Clippard, 1998), positive judgments (Wong, Butler, Ficzere, & Kuperis, 1996), and confidence (Clippard, 1998; Tobin, 1998).

4. Final Thoughts

A close investigation of related research on teacher-student writing conferences revealed several main concerns. First of all, even though writing conferences are accepted as conversations about students' papers, and conversations require two people as both senders and receivers of the message, the researchers found a remarkable consistency in that teachers dominated conversations during the writing conferences (Glasswell, Parr, & McNaughton, 2003; Sperling, 1990; Thonus, 2002; Ulichny & Watson-Gegeo, 1989). The activities the teachers engaged in during those writing conferences were; reading the texts, asking and answering questions, diagnosing the problems, and providing suggestions. Often, teachers answered their own questions instead of allowing students to find the answers themselves.

Second, educators described the effective writing conferences based on students' own reflections about how they felt during the conferences. However, in conferencing, educators should go beyond the evaluations of teachers and students' responses in terms of assessing the effectiveness of a conference. Students' and teachers' feelings and attitudes toward the writing conferences are, of course, valuable information for the field. Still, while determining the effectiveness of a particular writing conference, researchers should also pay attention to a) what is happening in

a conference by considering both parties' input in making and negotiating meaning, b) relationships between what happens in a conference and its effects on the student's revision activities and attitudes toward writing, and c) the nature of the conference discourse and its effects on students' perceived self-efficacy toward writing.

Third, conducted research studies about writing conferences were mainly designed as case studies with limited participants. In most cases, the number of conferences recorded for each participant ranged from 1 to 2. More studies should be conducted with other research methods such as quantitative or mixed study designs. The researchers need to record multiple conferences over several months to identify common patterns with frequencies and repeated interaction rather than simply relying on an individual's feelings and behaviours assessed during limited interactions.

In order to conduct effective writing conferences, teachers need to be patient because providing quick solutions is not necessarily the best way to assist students in developing new skills. One-on-one interactions through writing conferences provide opportunities for students to shine. During conferences students can showcase their writing styles while teachers can recognize the students' strengths and weaknesses. When conferring teachers can empower students by giving them ownership regarding the development of their writing skills rather than dominating the conversation through frequent questions, explanations, and lectures like they often do during mini-lessons.

Teachers should provide models for their students to improve their writing and help students better understand the writing process. Students can have examples from experienced writers who model the strategies or actions that lead to successful writing while avoiding unnecessary pitfalls. For students to be truly successful writers they also need to develop high self-efficacy beliefs toward writing. This is important because high self-efficacy leads students to motivate themselves, set goals, and expend the necessary effort to achieve their goals.

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